

vertigo as a boundary language laboratory

Alfred Hitchcock's 1958 film *Vertigo* involves issues central to boundary language and critical theory as a whole. The theme of falling and fear of heights goes directly to the body's resistance to falling, a stereognostic defense against the death drive; but the death drive itself, in its involvement with the Lacanian 'partial object' (a), leads directly to the logic of the hysteric: pleasure is reported as pain. The vanishing point is enlisted as the ultimate partial object. The hysterical subject is caught between two alienating Others, one a 'Mr. Big' who pulls the strings from behind the scenes; at the antipode is the interpellating Œdipal force of the Law, whose exception, interpreted as spatial *poché*, offers the Hitchcockian hysteric some promise of escape. Not so in *Vertigo*, however, where all points vanish down.

1. Freudian artifact



Scotty, in his position within the *poché* of the partial object, spying on 'Madeleine' who is buying flowers for Carolotta's grave.

The essence of the Freudian dreamworld lies in the function of the artifact. Normally artifact functions as the invisible support of representation whose 'collateral' signification is suppressed (the poetic sounds of conventional words, the arbitrary shapes of letters, etc.). In the dream, these artifacts dominate. A 'fallen' woman or man is no longer the spouse who has given in to adultery but a pedestrian who has literally stumbled while crossing the street. Someone who is 'snowed under' with work is literally covered with white snow. In the interaction of these 'liberated' artifacts, something Rousselian occurs. A narrative is invented to cover up the inconsistencies of coincidental appearance. In the case of *Vertigo*, the perception of falling is the artifact liberated from the symbolism in which it played the role of a metaphor of failure to meet the obligations of the network of symbolic relations. A policeman, Scotty has allowed a colleague to die. Although the colleague was killed by a fall, it is Scotty who has really 'fallen' through failure. This fall is a loss of support; his position is 'unsupportable'. Like Roussel's word plays, where some alternative meaning is placed opposite its original, *Vertigo's* artifact constructs a story about the 'not all', the feminized partial object, the divided feminine: Judy is hired to play Madeleine, the wife of Elster, an industrialist who intends to kill his real wife. Scotty is hired to follow Judy, who appears to believe that she is the re-incarnation of a dead Latina, Carlotta Valdéz. Scotty falls in love and hopes to cure Madeleine of her delusion, but he is drawn to the scene where (he thinks) Madeleine jumps to her death but which in fact is the murder of the real Madeleine, pushed from a convent tower by her husband. Judy and Elster hide in the dark *poché* of the bell tower, safe from discovery because of Scotty's fear of heights.



'Madeleine' contemplates the portrait of Carlotta Valdéz, whose bouquet, coiffure, and jewelry are parts of Judy's costume as a conspirator.

Later, Scotty runs across Judy among the lunchtime crowds on a San Francisco street. Fascinated by the resemblance, he persuades Judy to play Madeleine, not knowing that she in fact was the Madeleine he knew, but a thin margin of difference cannot be overcome. When he discovers the jewel that Judy/Madeleine had worn to simulate Carlotta's costume, he realizes the ruse.

2. the inside frame

The dark at the top of the tower stairs is the location proper of the partial object, the *petit objet a*, the necessary surplus created by the trick of switching Judy for Madeleine. Quickly, we must recognize the identity between this space and our own, the dark auditorium space of the audience, who while superficially enduring the pain of suspense nonetheless enjoys the pleasure of watching others in pain. The audience's vertigo is

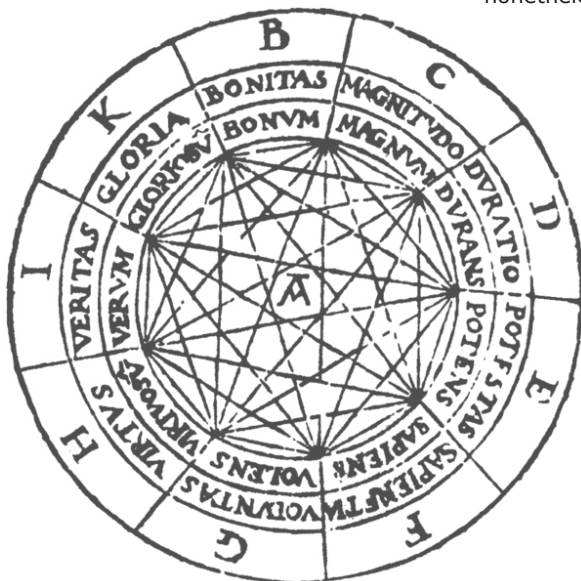
directly depicted by Hitchcock's animated sequence showing Scotty's head in the center of concentric, whirling spirals. The dimension of vertigo is, for the audience, the giddy 'sagittal' dimension of their line of sight, the arrow that penetrates the screen and relocates their gaze as a point 'from which the object gazes back', the vanishing point.

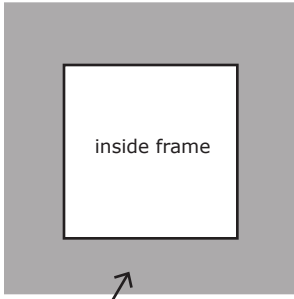
The tower, with its band of darkness surrounding the core stairway, is in fact a model of this inside frame and its location of the audience, along with the conspirators, in its margin. Like the billiard table in Roussel's *Parmi les noires*, it is inscribed with 'white letters' — runes which set in motion the interpolating ivory spheres which, bouncing off the cushion, change direction, hit other balls, and constitute a game of contingencies. These letters are the glyphs placed on the concentric 'memory wheels' constructed by Ramón Llull, the 12th c. Spanish mystic who claimed that memory, in order to recover everything within the human spirit, must first empty out the representational vector that tied content to ordinary meaning. Roussel's Surrealist reputation comes from his similar attempt to 'deconstruct' phrases and use the remainder to fashion narratives with impossibly minute detail.

The banded field, the inside frame, is also in plan view the Other whose authority is sustained only by the belief-in-power of its subjects, who in some sense is also the audience immobilized in the *poché* of the artifact of the work of art. What is this in relation to the Lacanian 'partial object'?

diagrams: vertigo as a laboratory

Llull's minimally labelled memory wheel:





location of the partial object, the 'a' that creates the frame/Other

What first springs to mind is self-consciousness, the motive, the plan. This is 'what is to be concealed' in order that the representation might work, might lure, might convince, might persuade — in other words, 'rhetoric'! This is the 'silent' middle term of the master signifier, the $\bar{a}b$, which is the anamorph, pure 'signifierness'. This is the 'operator' able to organize other meanings while not possessing a meaning of its own. The first proof of this in *Vertigo* is the main operator, Judy/Madeleine. She is what she is by virtue of being 'not-all' ... who in fact is 'too much' through role as a doubled personality but who is 'never one' because, even when she is revealed as an actress recruited to deceive Scotty, cannot escape the 'loop' of self-reference that is always missing the key element of representational identity.

3. verticality as the motif of the uncanny

We can easily forget the final scene of 'The Sandman', the story by E. T. A. Hoffman that initiated Freud's interest in the uncanny. Nathanael has gone with his friends to visit a famous church in a nearby town. They climb the church bell tower to enjoy the equally famous view. Nathanael spots Coppélius in the crowd below, 'goes mad', and jumps from the tower to his death. We can spot, through the complementary optics of *Vertigo*, Nathanael's real condition: he has played the part of the partial object! Like Scotty, he has realized that he was the key condition, the anamorphic lens, that made the feminine not-all operate with equanimity. The automaton doll Olympia was 'brilliant' because of his susceptibility to a self-administered 'cold reading' technique that interpreted her responses as deep, 'weighty'. Nathanael placed Olympia 'on stage' within a frame where his role as the real partial object was invisible. Animating (literally, in the etymological sense of creating a mind) her words and actions made the mechanical tricks credible. That is to say, Olympia's life and wit were not the clever simulation of Spalanzani and Coppello, but the material substrate designed to remain permanently open to Nathanael's cold reading techniques.

Nathanael's drop from the vertical tower was a collapse of this (phallic) project of animus construction. Significantly, he could 'fake' his love for Olympia and his disdain for the devoted Claire, but his anxiety (impossible to fake) came from his concealed role in the 'inflation' of the ultimate party-doll, Olympia. This role, concealed within the *poché* of the inside frame, the 'letters in white' on the cushion of the billiard table, connects to its antipodal moment at the beginning of the story, where Nathanael concealed himself behind

a curtain in his father's study to spy on his alchemical experiments with the lawyer, Coppélius. Like Scotty's guilt about forsaking a colleague, Nathanael had disobeyed his father and the injunction of the nurse about the Sandman stealing the eyes of unsleeping children. Who will eat those eyes? is the question of the nursery tale. For Nathanael, this is a 'rune' (Roussel: *lettres du blanc*) that translates to the limpid but blind eyes of Olympia.

In the iconography of the blind eye, we have the Rosicrucian triangle with an eye, above the line of clouds or stars that conceals the divine Empyrean. From below, this etherial level is invisible, and by a transport of privation to prohibition, the all-seeing eye equates to the blind eye. We cannot see it, therefore it 'sees by not seeing'. This is the logic of Tiresius's blindness (vision of the future in exchange for loss of sight in the present) as well as the goddess Justitia's apparent headlessness. 'Blind chance' in the operation of the Rousselian billiard table leads to the wild stories about the cannibal gangs of the 'old plunderer' (*pilliard*) told by the white man in letters to his wife (*lettres du blanc*). What we often fail to notice in this exchange of vision for insight is the vertical dimension: it IS the exchange. The 'failure' of Scotty to support his colleague converts to his lack of support against the fall to death, his vertigo, but this must be written in the rune marginalizing the frame constructed around the partial object Madeleine-Judy.

Is this not the compelling dimension of 'suture', the film theorists term explaining how the audience finds itself inside the frame of the screen? Only by falling, only by breaking bonds with 'colleagues' in the audience, can the audience effect the passage from the dark margin, in possession of the white letters that set off the interpolation of narrative, the dream romance of the filmic representation.

Justitia (Justice) shown in her position the Zodiac, between Leo and Virgo.

